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Discordant Voices

A Rash of Opposing Statements Bring Reagan Foreign Policies Into Question

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WASHINGTON, March 19 — During the Presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan often took the Carter Administration to task for vacillation and confusion in its foreign policy statements, and last month his counselor, Edwin Meese 3d, assured a national television audience that, by contrast, the Reagan Administration "will speak with one voice."

News Analysis

But lately the Republican newcomers have discovered that it is easier to promise harmony and consistency than to practice it.

A flurry over the comments of Richard E. Pipes, the Harvard expert on the Soviet Union who is now a member of the National Security Council staff, is merely the latest in a string of foreign policy bobbles, disagreements and reversals that have irked and worried foreign officials and embarrassed the White House and State Department.

Mr. Pipes caused a stir when he was quoted, but not identified, in a Reuters news agency interview as saying that there was no alternative to war with the Soviet Union if the Russians did not abandon Communism. He was also quoted as saying that Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher of West Germany was susceptible to Soviet persuasion.

West Germans Were Unhappy

The West Germans were unhappy and the White House so concerned that reporters were quickly summoned by the White House press secretary, James S. Brady, who issued a terse statement disavowing Mr. Pipes's remarks as neither authorized nor an accurate reflection of policy. High-level State Department officials were equally vexed at Mr. Pipes's stridency.

On Monday Mr. Brady was disavowing another Administration official, John A. Bushnell, acting Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs.

On Thursday Mr. Bushnell, seeking to play down American involvement in El Salvador, told reporters at a background briefing: "Our impression is that this story is running about five times as big as it really is." Referring to the 54 American advisers sent to that country, he added that "judging by the press coverage of this I would have thought we had deployed a whole division."

Privately some Administration officials were embarrassed, acknowledging that press coverage of El Salvador had largely responded to the Administration's own aggressive efforts to publicize outside aid to the leftist guerrillas there.

'Speaking for Himself'

White House strategists, feeling it was a mistake to get into a confrontation with the press, sent Mr. Brady out to say that the President did not feel the situation was being exaggerated and that Mr. Bushnell "was speaking for himself."

There have been other zigzags as well. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger created concern in Europe when he unexpectedly raised the possibility that neutron warheads might be deployed in Western Europe. Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. rushed out a cable to reassure the Europeans that this was not United States policy.

Navy Secretary John F. Lehman, meeting with reporters in early March, came out against continued American observance of the strategic arms agreements signed with Moscow in 1972 and 1979. By nightfall the State Department felt obliged to disavow Mr. Lehman's comments and to say for the first time that Washington would abide by the agreements as long as the Russians did.

The State Department has done its own fast turnarounds, too. On Friday Mr. Haig talked ominously about forthcoming Soviet military maneuvers in Poland and how that situation was getting tense again. After some meetings in Moscow the department changed its tune and said it was no longer so concerned, though privately some officials were fearful of having sounded the alarm once too often.

Soviet Intentions Often Unclear

Soviet intentions are often unclear. The Carter Administration sounded alarms about Poland last December that were not borne out by Soviet actions.

But the Reagan Administration's problems run deeper than that. Representative Benjamin S. Rosenthal, Democrat of New York, charged yesterday that "the up-and-down, roller coaster, zigging and zagging" of statements suggested that the Administration's policy was "essentially based on a reaction to the Soviets" without a positive strategy.

Privately, some Administration officials acknowledge that the Reagan foreign policy team has still not worked out an overall policy framework or conceptualized the intellectual underpinnings of its daily actions. "Aside from opposing the Soviets, we don't really have a foreign policy," said one experienced diplomat. "All this is such a change that people are disoriented," said another career diplomat. "There's a lot of confusion inside the Government."

What compounds the problem is that the Administration recruited a number of highly articulate, strong-minded, outspoken and often hard-line intellectuals who were accustomed to airing their views, and they find it hard to break those habits and become anonymous bureaucrats.

Very Pessimistic Estimates

Mr. Pipes, for example, was the well-known leader of the "B Team" intelligence assessment in 1976 that produced very pessimistic estimates of Soviet abilities and intentions that were considerably at odds with official estimates.

Since then he has written widely about the militancy of Marxism-Leninism, Soviet expansionism and Soviet preparations for fighting nuclear war, and has traced the roots of what he sees as Soviet terrorism to 19th-century Russian history. In a harbinger of the Administration's early statements, he wrote of the Moscow leadership last year: "We must expose its support of terrorism as widely as possible. It must be made absolutely clear that these actions will no longer be tolerated."

Even Administration officials who agree with those views privately assert the need for greater discipline in the new foreign policy team. Some suggest that such problems are part of the learning process for a team unaccustomed to official responsibilities. Others predict that such problems will persist until the President and his top advisers have solidified their basic policy framework.